

# Clara A. Swain

The Orient's First Woman Physician



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# THE ORIENT'S FIRST WOMAN PHYSICIAN



TO be a physician in attendance upon a rajah's family, and to have his retinue of elephants and camels placed at her disposal to convey her guests and their baggage from railway station to palace, whenever they should make her visits, does not fall to the lot of many American women, but such was the experience of Miss Clara Swain, M. D., the first woman physician ever sent by a missionary society to the Orient.

When the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society sent its first two missionaries to India, in 1869, it had the honor of bidding godspeed to two pioneers in educational and medical work for the women of India; for Isabella Thoburn became the founder of the first Christian college for women in all Asia, and Dr. Clara Swain established the first hospital for the women of the Orient. Dr. Swain began her beneficent ministrations to India's suffering womanhood the very day after her arrival

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in Bareilly, and during her first year treated 1300 patients.

The erecting of hospitals which she brought about, has in connection with its beginning the flavor of romance, and seems to have come almost from the touch of an Aladdin's lamp. She was not long in the country before the need of a place to which the people might come for treatment became imperative, and the manner in which a desirable site was procured can best be told in Dr. Swain's own words:

"A party of us visited his Highness, the Nawab of Rampur, who owned the property that we desired, but we had little hope of securing the site. The Nawab, when he heard we were coming, sent out twenty-four horses for us, so that at each of the six stages of the route we had four fresh ones, and drove in sumptuous carriages, with coachmen, two grooms, and an outrider. Toward the last we had three cavalymen to escort us into the city of Bareilly. We found in part of his residence, a house especially for us, servants in attendance and everything on the most magnificent scale for our entertainment.

"The first evening of our arrival, the

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Nawab sent two pairs of horses and two carriages to take us about the city, but said that he could not see us that evening as he was especially engaged with his prayers. The next morning we went for our eventful interview, to see if possibly we might purchase the land we wanted. As we drove through the gardens, five royal elephants made their salaams to us.

“It was with much trepidation that we went into the Nawab’s presence. We praised his gardens and palaces, and while we talked he smoked his hookah. When the object of our mission was reached, and we asked if the site could be procured at a price, for a hospital, we had scarcely proceeded when his Highness smiled graciously and said, ‘Take it, take it; I give it to you for that purpose.’ We were breathless. In one word he had given us an estate worth \$15,000.”

In January, 1874, the hospital building was completed. Its cost, including the remodelling of the house already on the estate, for a home and dispensary, was about \$10,000. Thus equipped, the work grew, making such demands on the doctor’s strength that she was obliged to come home

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in her seventh year for a furlough of two years. In 1885, she received a call from the Rajah of Khetri, in the province of Jeypore, in Rajputana. She went to the palace and professionally treated his wife, the ranee, and was asked to remain to become physician to the palace. The princess became interested in her benevolent work, and erected a dispensary for women and children in the city, on condition that Dr. Swain would remain, which she did, placing the former hospital in the hands of other women physicians who had come from America in the meantime.

It was during her years of stay at the palace that not only she, but her friends, received royal hospitalities of Oriental gorgeousness. The people of Rajputana were very proud, bigoted Hindus, and would not tolerate the preaching of a missionary on their streets or in the bazaar, but Dr. Swain was given much liberty. She distributed religious books and portions of the Bible, taught Christian hymns, which were sung in the palace, and conducted the dispensary and a school for girls.

Dr. Swain's influence was very helpful in the effort subsequently made to per-

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suade the government to bring the marriage age of girls up to twelve years. It is also an occasion for honest pride on her part that young women in whom she has taken special interest should now be at the head of hospitals which the English surgeons declare to be among the best conducted in India.

She has also witnessed a marked change in public sentiment in regard to medical aid for women. "A few years ago," she says, "a Parsee in Bombay gave \$50,000 to build a hospital for women and children. An Indian woman placed at the disposal of the government \$60,000 for carrying on, in one province, woman's medical work, and another woman donated \$6000 for a hospital for women."

Dr. Swain's home was for several years in Canandaigua, N. Y., where she taught in the girls' seminary, and it was while there that she decided to study medicine, little knowing then what an eventful career was before her. In 1895 she resigned from the work, having given twenty-seven years of service to India. During the Jubilee year she had the great pleasure of visiting the scenes of her former labors.